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STAT

# Mail Spies Stopped By Fear

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William Cotter, the former chief postal inspector cast by the Rockefeller Commission in the role of hero for stopping the CIA's mail opening program, says he acted only out of fear that the cover had already blown off the operation.

Cotter told the Senate Intelligence Committee he became concerned that the project had been discovered after he received a letter from the Federation of American Scientists asking if the Post Office permits other agencies of government to open first-class mail.

The question fit perfectly the 20-year operation in which postal employees turned their heads while the CIA rifled mail sacks, looking for suspicious letters.

"It appeared to me that the project was known," Cotter said. He noted that the federation's membership included one former CIA official and a number of scientists with high security clearances.

THE AUTHOR of the letter that worried Cotter, Jeremy J. Stone, director of the federation, said in a telephone interview that his question was just a shot in the dark. He said he was asking a number of agencies questions about privacy.

Cotter ultimately wrote a flat denial of any mail opening in a letter to Stone. He admitted to the senators: "I knew it was false."

But motivated by the letter from Stone, Cotter said he urged CIA Director Richard Helms to terminate the project. CIA documents indicate that Helms briefed Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell and Postmaster General Winton Blount on the project and decided to continue it when the two Nixon Cabinet members expressed no objections.

After Mitchell and Blount left the government, Cotter said he renewed his request that the project be terminated. CIA Director William E. Colby scrapped the operation shortly after he succeeded Helms in 1973.

COTTER, WHO became chief postal inspector in 1969, knew about the mail opening because of an 18-year career with the CIA.

The CIA said earlier this week that 215,000 pieces of mail were opened in New York, the largest of four mail interceptions. Only mail between the United States and Communist countries was intercepted.

The committee listened to testimony for about five hours yesterday in an effort to determine who knew about the mail opening effort and who authorized it. The results were often contradictory.

Helms, making his 14th trip to Washington since he was named ambassador to Iran in 1973, testified that he briefed both Mitchell and Blount on the mail opening program, showing them samples of material obtained from reading the letters.

Blount testified earlier in the day that, although Helms had discussed a secret CIA project that involved diverting mail, he was never told the letters were being opened.

MITCHELL, whom the committee hopes to question in a public session tomorrow, has told the panel in executive session that he remembers the Helms briefing, but he thought it referred to examination of the outside of envelopes without opening them. Examining the outside of envelopes is legal; opening them is a violation of the law.

Helms said he showed Blount typewritten copies of intercepted letters. He said he can't remember if he told Blount that letters were being opened, but he said he assumed that Blount would know there was no other way to copy the contents.

"Perhaps I wasn't specific enough," Helms said.